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# In between

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# In Between

Graduate Thesis  
Master of Fine Arts  
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
Rochester Institute of Technology

by Stephanie Wratten

August 2002

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# In Between

MFA Thesis by Stephanie Wratten

## Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Past Work	4
III. History and Theory: Representations of Childhood	13
IV. Influences	22
V. Thesis Work	27
VI. Future Directions	33
VII. Conclusion	35
Bibliography	36

## I. Introduction

What is a child? Are children innocent and naive, as they might appear in a precious family portrait? Or are they sophisticated and sexual, as portrayed by artists such as Larry Clark? My work explores multiple aspects of childhood, particularly as children become adolescents, and shows the time as full of contradictions.

Most developmental psychologists divide our lives into several states: infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. But these are 20th-century concepts. The historian Phillip Aries argues that childhood only became a separate state of life a few hundred years ago. Before development of modern society, children were dressed as miniature adults and expected to behave accordingly. Changing social structures — a nuclear family with a mother who devoted herself to her children — led to ideas about childhood as a distinct stage of life. By the early 20th century, new forces, most notably the expansion of secondary and post-secondary education, gave rise to the concept of adolescence. Adolescents no longer entered the work force as adults but instead became part of a distinct youth culture. Psychologists began to study the period as one of transition from childhood to adulthood. (Turner, page 3)

Our perception of childhood and adolescence appears to be changing yet again. With the pervasiveness of television and the internet, adults struggle to protect children from all kinds of knowledge about the world. These and other threats to childhood purity have often made innocence seem all the more appealing. In the words of art historian Carol Mavor, "Though we might not know what childhood really is, our cultural imagination has produced a fantasy of the child that is pure, innocent, recognizable." (Mavor, page 21) But as



children become more sophisticated, the images we make of them are also changing. This is evidenced by the work of some recent artists who have rejected the "fantasy" of innocence and depict a more knowing child. The challenge to the expectation of innocence has led to controversy and confusion; I created my photographs during this critical juncture.

Nowhere is the uncertainty about children more evident than in the various words we use to describe them. Throughout this paper, I use the term children to refer to young people up to the age of 12, and the terms adolescent and/or teenager for people approximately ages 13 - 19. The subjects of my photographic explorations are primarily ages 11, 12 and 13, thus overlapping these two broad categories. Generally, I refer to them as middle schoolers, early adolescents, students, or my subjects. Depending on the context, I also occasionally use the terms children or adolescent/teenage to emphasize the aspects of that life stage that are evident in the middle school students. As we struggle to define them, they also struggle to define their identities; I depict this endeavor in my photographs.

My images show a group of 11 - 13 year olds confronting the challenges of the transition from childhood to adolescence. By depicting them in their everyday lives at school, the images reveal the students negotiating these issues alone or with their peers. While other artists are busy building up or tearing down stereotypes about childhood purity, I am interested in exploring the co-existence of innocence and experience in young people. With this body of photographic work, I intend to draw attention to the perplexities of the time between childhood and adolescence.

My investigation of this transitional period has emerged from both artistic and theoretical concerns. The next section of this paper addresses the photographic work and research that I did over the year leading up to the work on my thesis. This is followed by a section addressing the history of images of children, and one that describes three contemporary photographers who photograph children. The final sections describe my thesis work and show, as well as future directions of the project.

## II. Previous Work

"Few developmental processes over the course of the life cycle have more impact than puberty does." (Turner, page 272)

While teaching junior high and high school for seven years, I became intrigued by the transition from childhood to adolescence. Although each individual student was unique, seventh graders invariably had different behavior and different concerns than ninth and tenth graders. Even the older students noticed this difference. Tenth or eleventh graders would frequently look at the entering seventh graders and comment on how young they seemed, how active they were, and how silly their behavior was. The teachers, of course, remembered that just a couple years ago those tenth graders exhibited the exact same traits. According to one psychologist's theory of adolescence, "New and demanding social expectations, such as relinquishing childish behavior and acting in mature and responsible ways, require the negotiation and restructuring of new behaviors." (Turner, page 302) While all of childhood is a time of growth and development, the years surrounding puberty are a particularly great transition.

Entering graduate school in photography, I decided to draw upon my experience as a teacher in choosing my initial project. Previously, my photographs usually included people, and I was frequently drawn to photographing them in their environment. The idea of photographing teenagers, or more specifically, students around the age of twelve on the verge of adolescence, was very appealing. The great changes that occur would be exciting to represent visually. However, it also presented challenges. To be successful, a

project would require unlimited access to a group of students in a school environment.

Fortunately, I made the acquaintance of Dale Spafford, who worked at an inner city middle school in Rochester, New York. The program he coordinated helped students stay on an academic track toward college or careers. He offered the opportunity for me to photograph the students in his program. In exchange, I volunteered to create a photo club for interested students. Dale introduced me to the principal, and I attempted to get permission to photograph around the school. However, as part of the school's general concern about security in a rough neighborhood, the principal would not allow photography of any student without parental permission. Obtaining the necessary signatures in such a large school was too daunting a task, so I started photographing only the students who were a part of Dale's program and came to the photo club.

During this process I began to realize how much the development of relationships is an integral part of this kind of photographic work. Especially with the pressure of graduate school, the large investment of time and effort that led to only limited access was frustrating. In order to make a meaningful body of work however, it was necessary to secure access and gain the trust of my subjects. That some attempts to do this would fall through was an important lesson.

I chose a Holga, a fifteen-dollar plastic camera, to use in the photography club. Because they are simple and inexpensive, the cameras seemed a logical choice for teaching. I decided to use a Holga for my own pictures of the students as well. Using the same camera would be an equalizing factor; I did not want to seem advantaged as a photographer by having an expensive camera. During



photo club meetings we took turns photographing each other. Occasionally, I was also able to take pictures as they hung out after school or volunteered at an after-school program for younger students. Because of my interest in environment and my limited time with the students, I expanded the project by making images that showed the school and its surroundings.

The resulting pictures were quiet portraits of the students showing their expressions and gestures, accompanied by images of an empty schoolyard. I edited this initial work to 15 black and white prints, printed about 15x15 inches and matted. For presentation, they were arranged in five groups of three, connected by visual elements but also highlighting the combination of the students and their environment (figure 1). The images were primarily quiet and solitary. In one picture two boys played basketball, but the photograph was more about gesture than action. Pictures of the schoolyard showed a deserted place but had evidence of kids' activity, such as a backstop behind the baseball field, graffiti on the track, etc. The Holga camera had a soft focus and caused a dark vignetting at the edge of the image; this effect created a feeling of nostalgia and emphasized the "other world" of childhood lost during adolescence.



figure 1

While making this work, I was starting to look at the work of other photographers who worked with children or teenagers. Wendy Ewald caught my attention because her work involves teaching photography to young people. Exhibits and books of her work include photography by her and photography by the children she's taught. She also encourages them to write about the images, sometimes on the photographs themselves. Eager to experiment, I brought some of my photographs to the photo club and asked them to write around the edges about what it felt like to be in middle school. A group of six of these text/image collaborations was included in the presentation to provide the viewpoint of the students.

Ultimately however, the photographs, while interesting, did not reflect my original idea of showing the early adolescent period of transition, or "in between" time. Additionally, some people felt that the vignetting on the photographs aestheticized them, and was inappropriate for a project depicting students whose lives were likely difficult due to poverty.

With the opportunity to start fresh after the first presentation and critique, I decided to pursue access in another school. The ability to photograph regularly and without restrictions might enable me to find images showing my ideas more readily. Additionally, choosing a school that was less disadvantaged would allow the attention of viewers to be on the issues of adolescence rather than issues of race and power. In January of 2001, thanks to RIT professors Dan Larkin and Ron Richardson, I met Nancy Hackett, who is the head of the middle school at the Harley School. The school is K-12, but has three distinct divisions. The middle school is composed of 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th graders, with only 30-40 students per grade; the small size seemed ideal. After looking at some of my

photographs and discussing my plans, Nancy introduced me to the headmaster. With his permission, I composed a letter to the parents introducing myself and my project. The school already had permission slips on file from parents that allowed photography of their children in school; it was agreed that my work at the school could fall under those parameters. Clearly the school was eager to support me and within a few weeks I was able to begin shooting freely.

Hanging around the school during breaks and lunchtime, I started to get to know the students and photograph them during their free time. An initial plan included eventually photographing in classes, but socially what was going on between classes rather than during them turned out to be much more interesting. Some concerns of middle schoolers that were familiar from teaching began to emerge: the awkwardness of the boy whose girlfriend is taller than he, the preoccupation with photos to hang in lockers, the passing of very important notes. In order to blend in more fully, I specifically tried to place myself in a very non-teacherly role, encouraging the students to call me Stephanie, and hanging around with them as much as possible. My small stature was advantageous — I was non-threatening and seen as an equal.

During the next couple months I created a body of work that, as before, showed the expressions and gestures of the kids, but this time also reflected their interactions. My presentation for critique consisted of 12 images approximately 16x20 inches. I mounted them with no mats and only the small black border from the negative edge, to have as little as possible separating the viewer from experiencing the image. The content of the photographs came much closer to my original thoughts and showed some of the unique characteristics of the age group (figure 2). In one photo, two girls hang out by their lockers, drinking soda



and most likely gossiping about friends; the frequent checking-in with girlfriends and cementing the bonds of a group are important in their developing social lives. In another image, two girls hug and pose for me; their smiles reveal braces, an easily recognizable sign of modern adolescence which invariably becomes necessary just as a young person is beginning to feel self-conscious about appearance. As they pose together trying to look grown-up, a younger boy is caught in the image glancing at them; in contrast he looks small and young. During puberty, the more rapid development of girls frequently creates scenes such as this one.



figure 2

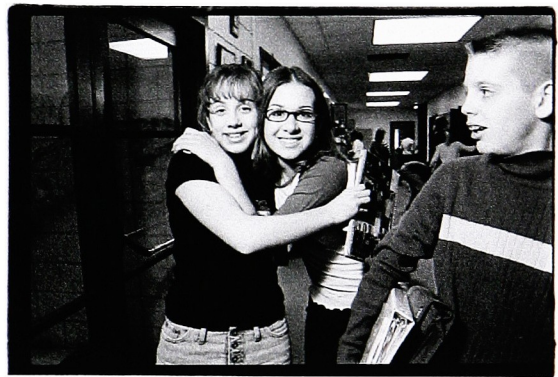


figure 3

While beginning work on the next phase of the project, I explored the work of noted critics and artists who challenged traditional documentary photography such as Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula. They tried to integrate current theory about representation and objectivity while continuing to do a kind of documentary work. For example, in her book, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, Rosler juxtaposes text and images in an attempt to show that neither can fully tell the story, and also emphasize the frequent objectification of the less fortunate in traditional documentary. A critique of the genre is integral



to the work. The title itself "not only raises the question of representation but suggests it's fundamentally flawed character." (Sekula, page 124)

Allan Sekula raises several issues about photography and documentary photography in particular in his seminal essay "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary." He feels the strength of documentary photography comes from "the unequivocal character of the camera's evidence, in an essential realism," but, as he points out, depending on the circumstances, the same image in different presentations can convey very different messages. (Sekula, page 121) Recognizing this negates the traditional practice of documentary photography that claims to represent the truth. He is especially concerned when photographs are treated as fine art and removed from their context, and when there has been no critical questioning about the power of the photographer and the representation of the subject. The pioneering work of Sekula and others has been crucial in the development of more critical viewpoints of photography in general and documentary work in particular.

Thinking about these ideas, I felt even more that the switch to the Harley School was a good decision. Working in a school environment that I was very familiar with gave me an advantage over an outsider in terms of being sensitive to my subjects. Instead of being disadvantaged, the Harley students' class background was similar to or higher than mine. Finally, I was photographing not as a teacher, but blending in as a peer as much as possible. While not completely eliminating issues connected to representing those other than oneself, it certainly created a more sensitive and aware situation. I also decided to again pursue ways of including the students in the project, which eventually came to fruition in the form of a book.

In writing about my work, I now include a kind of disclaimer. In it, I make clear that the photographs are not truths but only my constructions based on observations and the particular biases that I bring to the situation. This "disclaimer" also gives me the opportunity to remind viewers that the photographs represent a particular group of people whose experiences aren't necessarily universal, and that I can't speak for them, but only show my viewpoint through photographs. Sekula himself included such a statement at the end of an essay about a project on schools, saying "I cannot speak for the inner experience, ambitions, or future of the students and teachers who posed for me." (Sekula, page 144) Because of our greater awareness of these issues, artists are frequently including such statements when showing photographs of others.

After reading this and looking at work by Sekula, Rosler, and others, I decided to switch to photographing in color. While originally the black and white look seemed appropriate for its timeless and nostalgic feel, the aesthetic seemed very connected to traditional documentary photography. Switching to color might allow more room for experimentation without being immediately linked to a particular genre. Secondly, the image-conscious world of contemporary adolescence is very colorful, and might best be conveyed in color imagery.

The next group of images was the most successful of that year. At the end of year review, I presented 18 images, approximately 18x22 inches, with the photograph bled to the edge of the paper. More time at the school and with the kids allowed me to capture even more of the variety of their lives. Several issues were visually evident in the way the students presented themselves in the images.

One issue was that of connection and friendship. In one picture, two girls at a lunch table are whispering to each other, the sharing of secrets clearly cementing their friendship (figure 4). In another, three girls pose for me on the tennis court, two of them showing off their matching sandals probably purchased during a joint trip to the mall. Another was the idea of presentation of oneself, which often included showing off to impress peers, or me. In one image Michael is goofing around — he's stuck a flower behind his ear and is guzzling a carton of milk while his friends stand around looking and laughing (figure 5). Finally, I also observed how they seemed child-like in one moment and adult-like in another. One photo shows a girl standing in the hall by herself, her pose and body features still looking very little girl-like, while another image depicts a girl pulling up her strapless dress as she tries to look adult at a semi-formal dance.

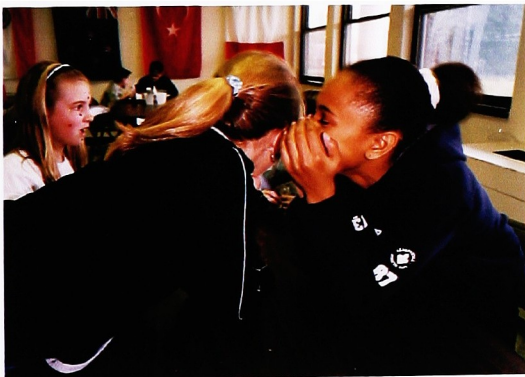


figure 4



figure 5

At this point, my work had evolved to the place where the imagery was conveying my thoughts. Looking at, discussing, and writing about the work of critics and other photographers led to improved clarity of my ideas. My rapport with the students was continuing to improve. The project was ready to become my thesis.



### III. History and Theory: Representations of Childhood

While embarking on my thesis, I also investigated the history of how children had been imaged. I had looked at some photographs of children taken by contemporary photographers, but was not knowledgeable about past images of childhood. Investigating this history, I realized how these images frequently represented societal ideas about childhood. Contemporary images often referenced aspects of past representations of children, but were also going off in dramatically new directions. Understanding the history helped me put my own photographs in perspective.

Before the 18th century, the image of a child was rare in Western art, except as the Holy Child in religious works. Generally, these images were meant



figure 6

to be read symbolically, and did not depict a child as an individual. (Steward, page 17)

When children did appear in non-religious images, mostly portraits of some kind, they usually looked like small adults. (Rubinstein, page 1) Paintings, like this one by Anthony Van Dyck in 1635 (figure 6), showed children in very much the same way that adults were depicted. The children pose seriously, dressed in formal suits that mimicked the

adult fashions of the time; their hand gestures are even similar to those used by adults in portraits.

In the late 1700's, a new image of children begins to surface. (Higonnet, page 24) Sir Joshua Reynolds painting "Age of Innocence" typifies this new

image of childhood and helped define it. (figure 7) Instead of mirroring adults, the child in Reynolds' painting looks childlike, innocent, and otherworldly. In another image, Thomas Gainsborough's "The Artist's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly," the butterfly, shown escaping the girl's grasp, perhaps represents the fleeting nature of life, and particularly childhood. (Steward, page 20) The sense of the two girls as vulnerable and needing to be protected demonstrates a shift toward an attempt to depict the special qualities of children.



figure 7

According to art historians, these images and others like them were reflecting new social ideas about children that developed in the late 1700's and early 1800's. Several concepts that contributed to this development were "a private, nurturing middle class family. . . a capitalist belief opposition between masculine public and feminine domestic spheres, and a political belief in the innate worth of the individual." (Higonnet, page 26) This kind of society allowed for children to be sheltered by mothers, and exist as separate individuals, innocent of adult faults. Images gave a form to this modern notion of childhood. The girl in the painting Age of Innocence doesn't really pay attention to anything, doesn't seem aware of the viewer, and appears socially, sexually, and psychologically innocent. (Higonnet, page 24) In family portraits, a shift in the attitude toward a child's position in the family is also evident. After the development of a nuclear middle class family, children are much more likely to



be painted in a central position, visually demonstrating their prominence in the family. (Steward, page 19)

Notable authors of the time were also writing in new ways about children. As William Wordsworth wrote in his poem "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,"

But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
Upon the growing Boy  
But he  
Beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
He sees it in his joy;

Wordsworth depicts children as pure and angelic; this natural spirituality is lost as children progress toward adulthood. (Eiss, page 1) In a similar vein, Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote about the education of children in the middle 18th

century, arguing that children were inherently good and should be accompanied in their search for knowledge rather than led by adults already corrupted by civilization. (Eiss, page 7)

By the middle of the 1800's this image of childhood, often referred to as the "Romantic child" (Rosenblum, page 9), had become well established.

The images of children in painting heavily influenced printmaking and the new greeting card and magazine industries. Illustrators such as Kate Greenaway produced popular images that were used on cards, in magazines, and in



figure 8

photograph effective. (Higonnet, pages 115-16) This example (figure 10) by Dorothea Lange was even titled "Damaged Child", implying that the expected innocent standard has been harmed in some way.

It turns out, however, that information about a subject is the key to how viewers interpret an image. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote in 1798 that "A glance at the surface of a living being confuses the observer; here as elsewhere, we may adduce the proverb 'We only see what we know' . . . perfect observation depends on knowledge." (quoted in Higonnet, page 122) If we can only see what we know, then if we perceive children to be innocent, we will certainly see that trait in photographs of them.



figure 11

Recently several scholars have researched images of children from the Victorian Era that to our contemporary eyes seem quite sexual. But it is believed that the images weren't perceived that way at the time. Children were thought to be free of adult sexuality, and so pictures of

them were interpreted as innocent. (Higonnet, page 125) In this example (figure 11), a painting by Seymour Joseph Guy entitled "Making a Train", the child probably was perceived as innocent and simply mimicking the primping of adult women. Today, a viewer might see suggestions of developing sexuality in the exposure of her breasts and her adult-like pose. What is it in the beliefs about children in contemporary society that had lead to this different perception?

Changes in society since World War II have contributed to the creation of sophisticated and knowledgeable children and adolescents with their own needs



advertisements. Through work by Greenaway and others, the "Romantic child" became not just a subject, but also a style. (Higonnet, pages 52-3) Her illustration of the nursery rhyme Ring-a-Ring-a-Roses (figure 8) shows children outlined very with abbreviated strokes, with facial features similar for each child. The setting functions mainly as a background to highlight her subjects. The simplicity of her style heightens the sense of innocence and naivete of the children.

During this time, photography had been invented and was used by people to depict all aspects of life, including children. In the 1800's Julia Margaret Cameron made a photograph entitled "Devotion" in which a mother looks down adoringly at her child, suggesting them as archetypes of the Madonna and Christ Child (figure 9). Cameron has actually used two negatives for the image, and manipulated them so that the scale of the baby is much larger than that of the adult. (Higonnet, page 112) The mother's gaze at the child focuses our attention there too; the viewer also adores the sweet innocence of the sleeping child's face.



figure 9

In 1907 Sadakichi Hartmann predicted that photography would bring the image of the child and of maternity into every home. (Higonnet, page 73) This prediction seems to have come true. One estimate says that 25 billion photographs are made each year in the United States alone, and that about half of those images are made of children. (Higonnet, page 87) When Kodak revolutionized photography in the early part of this century by making it easy



for an amateur to take pictures, they directed much of their marketing at women and specifically mothers.

The snapshot industry really took off during the 1950's. According to Stephanie Koonz, "the most salient symbol . . . of [Americans] newfound prosperity was the nuclear family." (Koonz, page 25) This nuclear family included a stay-at-home mom who looked after the house and cared for and protected the children. Now she herself, influenced by images of children in painting and printmaking, could create pictures of her children that depicted their innocence.

Since the late 1800's photographs of children have also been made extensively by social documentarians. Thanks in large part to documentary photographs, children play a "particularly symbolic role in the iconography of the poor." (Benn, page 70) Frequently, the photographer is attempting to use the photograph as evidence to show some injustice done to children. For example, Lewis Hine wanted to uncover terrible working conditions for minors in order to



figure 10

stimulate social change. The success of photographs such as these relies not only on a belief that photography depicts an accurate reality, but also on our expectation that children are healthy and pure. In other words, the photographer depends on Roland Barthes' "punctum," the term Barthes coined for an "element that rises from the scene . . . and pierces me." (Barthes, page 26) The shock of seeing a child

who is dirty and unhealthy when we expect a beautiful innocent child makes the

and values. "A massive baby boom, among all classes and ethnic groups, made America a 'child-centered' society". (Koonz, page 24) Lots of children meant a society focused on them like never before. Separate households were encouraged — newlyweds often struck out on their own and didn't live with the previous generation. Their children had a completely different experience growing up than the generation before. Even popular culture such as rock and roll contributed to a separation between generations and subsequent new ideas about adolescence. Although the term was in used in Britain beginning in the 1940's, many credit the United States with the invention of the teenager. (Rose, page 133)

The post-war prosperity helped support all these children. Between 1945 and 1960, per capita income grew by 35 percent and from 1947 to 1957 the number of salaried workers increased by 61 percent. (Koonz, page 24) In addition to growing up in a financially stable family, over the next several decades, teenagers began to get part-time jobs. They now had money to spend, and magazines as well as the newest media, TV, began to market directly to them. While a strong youth culture had begun after World War I, national forms of media after World War II led to its proliferation. In this culture, adolescents became conscious of image as they became consumers of all kinds of goods. One fashion historian notes that children have more choices in their clothes than ever before, and often choose adult-like clothing to project a certain image. (Rubinstein, page 3)

Changes in legislation, such as the laws in the 1970's that enabled girls to acquire birth control with parental permission, gave children more rights as individuals. (Brumberg, page 171) New policies like this one were further

evidence that adolescents were beginning to be thought of quite differently. Young people were no longer perceived as innocent children, but instead as independent decision-makers, with knowledge and experience of the world.

The 18th century ideal of Romantic childhood no longer seems appropriate and is being reinvented based on current ideas of children and adolescents. These new ideas have greatly influenced how we interpret pictures of young people. A photograph of a semi-nude child in an advertisement may have been perceived as innocent when we believed kids were naturally innocent; now viewers see postures of adult sexuality. A series of ads by Calvin Klein in 1995 sparked such a controversy, and ultimately resulted in the company withdrawing the campaign. (Higonnet, page 152) Why did the sexuality evident in the images (the models appeared to be anywhere between 12 and 25 years old) bring out such resistance in the viewing public?

People have become so attached and accustomed to the idea of the innocent "Romantic child"; many think of it as a child's true nature. However, like the revolution that created the Romantic child, our ideas about childhood are again changing. We now are conscious that a child can be independent, knowledgeable and sexually aware, or what Higonnet refers to as the "Knowing child." As images are beginning to reflect these ideas, many viewers who remain attached to the constructed idea that children are innocent by nature see the new images as a distortion or perversion of "natural" childhood. Thus, controversy ensues, such as that surrounding the Calvin Klein ads mentioned above. (Higonnet, page 193) But as writer Patricia Holland points out, "it seems that the oft-lamented loss is not so much of the innocence of childhood but of the innocence of the adult gaze." (Holland, page 118)

With these new ideas about childhood as a backdrop, two new bodies of work about children emerged in the mid-80's — Sally Mann's *At Twelve* and Judith Joy Ross' *Eurana Park*. Writer and curator Val Williams suggested that these artists paved the way for others to "explore both the pathos and joy of pre-adolescence." (Williams, page 12). Following is a discussion of how Mann, Ross and a third photographer, Lauren Greenfield, are imaging children. As contemporary female photographers who are exploring ideas and images of children in the midst of changing ideas, their work has greatly influenced mine.



#### IV. Influences

Sally Mann photographed her children while they were growing up, creating allegorical images about many issues connected to childhood. While the images are often criticized as sexualizing children, Mann says that they are not about sexuality but about "the grand themes: anger, love, death, sensuality and beauty." (page 20) It is certainly clear that each image challenges the notion of childhood innocence. Perhaps the controversy surrounding the images stems from the uncomfortable feelings created by such a direct confrontation with a new "Knowing child."

Throughout her work Mann makes both general and specific references to past imagery of children. An image entitled *Damaged Child* shows a girl of similar age and with a similar expression to Lange's famous photograph of the same name from 1936. But is this child (who we assume to be her child) actually "damaged"? By setting up this photograph, Mann shows an understanding of assumptions of truth about documentary photography of children and challenges them.



figure 12

More generally, Mann's work frequently references imagery of children as innocent and subverts it. An image such as *Jessie at 5* (figure 12) shows the traditional "Romantic child" completely fading into the darkness in the background. In contrast, Jessie, the sophisticated "Knowing child" is

highlighted in the foreground. She is naked from the waist up, posing

seductively, and wearing make-up and jewelry, suggesting her savviness about adult sexuality. Images like this one upset our cherished notions of naive childhood. In an image from her *At Twelve* series (figure 13) Mann again makes reference to the past by photographing a young girl with an old shattered photograph beside her. In this case, the image of Victorian childhood with fancy dresses that cover the body is literally broken; the modern girl wears tight shorts, the photo framed such that we focus on her crotch area. For today's child, growing up includes showing your body in ways that innocent children did not.



figure 13

Carol Mavor proposes that Sally Mann not only photographs adolescents but also does so in an adolescent manner. While Mann is in the role of mother/adult (responsible, protective), as an artist she also takes on a child-like (creative, exploratory) role. Between adult and child is adolescence; working in this in-between manner "emphasizes the multiple and often discomfiting contradictions between adulthood and childhood, masculinity and femininity, responsibility and play, sexuality and innocence." By allowing room for and even emphasizing paradox, this adolescent approach strengthens her photographs. (Mavor, pages 4-6, 25-27)

Judith Roy Ross makes intimate portraits, many of which are of children and adolescents, and like Mann's images, frequently deny the typical image of the innocent child. Whereas Sally Mann's images demonstrate that awareness of





figure 14

sexuality is present in children, Ross' images particularly depict the vulnerability and physicality of children. Her posed portraits suggest the idea of children posing for a formal painting. But while she references the formalism of paintings of children, these students are unlike the children in Romantic paintings of children who look comfortable, adjusted and oblivious to the viewer. Instead, Ross' subjects'

postures give away their uncertainty about how they should stand in front of the camera and the world.

Along with our new view of childhood, we have recognized adolescence as a separate stage. Invariably, the word awkward is frequently used to characterize this period of transition. When viewing Ross' picture entitled "The Stewart Sisters" (figure 14) most adults remember their own attempts to have their hairstyle and clothing fit the style of the day. However, rather than seeing these girls efforts as quaint, our new knowledge about adolescence leads us to perceive the children in this image as awkward instead. Susan Kismaric writes that "[Ross] asks us to consider the often painful tension between the public and private self". The idea of difficulty associated with children is new — previously adults looked to cute pictures of children as an escape from the challenging adult world. Seeing an element of challenge in growing up is a jolt to those accustomed to soothing pictures.



figure 15

The pictures in Lauren Greenfield's book *Fast Forward: growing up in the shadow of hollywood* [sic], show, as the title suggests, the idea of growing up too quickly in today's world. Greenfield photographed children and teenagers in Los Angeles over a

period of several years. Her work is done in the manner of many classic documentary photographers. Although her photographs appear much different, one thinks of Lewis Hine's dedication to exposing the working conditions of young children. Greenfield's concerns for children are completely contemporary: the children's awareness of image, and the overwhelming consumerism of modern culture. In this image of Ashleigh (figure 15), she weighs herself as her parents and friend look on. The most shocking part of the image is that the participation of the adults seems to condone Ashleigh's behavior. Rather than an innocent child, Ashleigh is aware of what she perceives to be necessary for success in today's world and takes action on it. Her parents don't appear to be protecting her from this loss of innocence, but instead are supporting her in this entry into a difficult world.

Greenfield traces her ideas through the less affluent children of Hollywood as well. In this image (figure 16) Tazmick signs for the



figure 16



camera as members of his tagger crew run from police. Even in this dangerous world it appears that image is important. Like Ashleigh in the previous picture, and like Higonnet's "Knowing child", Tazmick is knowledgeable about the world creates a presence for himself in it.

## V. Thesis Work

As my work developed and the research progressed, I began to recognize an element of contradiction in many of my photographs. Assembling my thesis show, I constructed an expansive vision of the childhood to adolescence transition that goes beyond innocence to present aspects of the paradoxical nature of that time. While photographing and talking to the kids, I observed the period as a time to celebrate childhood fun while trying out adult seriousness, a time of loneliness but also old and new friendships, and a time of lingering naivete but also experimentation with new aspects of sexuality.

I was quite conscious that my thesis project was very specific to a certain population — middle or upper middle class students at a small private institution in Rochester, New York. Perhaps partly because their lives are so secure, they were able to allow me fully into their experiences. With this project I do not want to assume that their experiences are similar to students their age in other countries, cities, or even right down the street. My work during my first quarter in graduate school was with kids at an inner city middle school. While it is just a short drive away, at that school a large percentage of the children live below the poverty line, and the school struggles to obtain even basic supplies for the students. One cannot assume that these students would be dealing with the same kinds of issues during their transition to adolescence.

During the shooting and editing, I focused on certain questions concerning the social structures that affect the young people I photographed. How do elements of childhood and adulthood co-exist in these students? Does their psychological development correspond to their physical development?

How and when does gender matter? What do media images and peer groups contribute to kids' struggles to balance conformity and individual identity? Visually how do adolescents present themselves in an image conscious world?

For the presentation of my thesis show, I framed 21 images. The photographs were printed as chromogenic prints on 20x24 inch paper and framed to approximately 26x32 inches in simple metal frames. The pictures were installed in the 2nd Floor Workspace Gallery at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. Visual Studies Workshop is a center for media studies, including photography, visual books, and video, and houses several gallery spaces. *In Between* was installed in a small one-room gallery. The size of the room allowed for intimate viewing of the photographs. Because it was self-contained, viewers could experience all the work as a cohesive statement about the child-adolescent transition.



figure 17

The first, and title, image of the show was "*In Between*." (figure 17) In this image one girl stands slightly sideways talking on the phone. Her hair is pinned back and her clothes are ordinary. Next to her another girl faces the camera with a defiant, knowing gaze. Her clothes hug her barely developing body and she strikes a pose for the camera. The two girls represent two stages in the transition from childhood to adolescence; they epitomize the "in between" time.

In the image entitled "*Career Day*," (figure 17) a girl poses for the camera wearing a black knit sleeveless top and skirt. Across her midriff, a small typed sign is attached, which reads "I'm a lawyer, stupid." At this school, career day

and the exploration of future jobs includes the opportunity to dress up in the costume of a profession. This girl shows her awareness of living in an image conscious world and directly challenges the public's assumptions about appearances by sporting the witty label. Clearly she is an example of Higonnet's "Knowing child" who has sophisticated knowledge of the world.

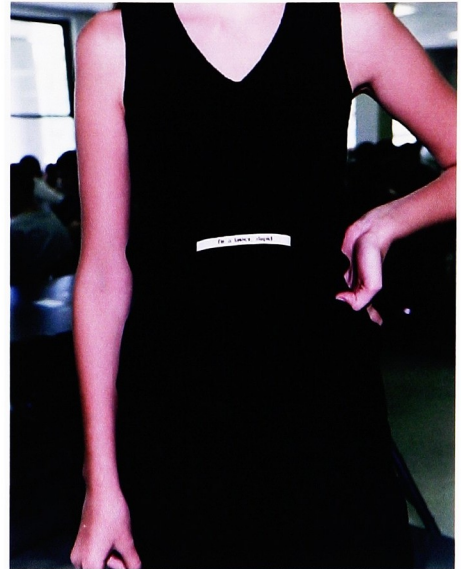


figure 18

Gender seems to matter in the speed of this development of sophistication. In contrast to the image-savvy girl in "Career Day", the boy in "Scuba" (figure 19) simply appears young. Each image included in the show was shot at the same middle school, so this boy could walk down the hall next to the girl in the previous image.

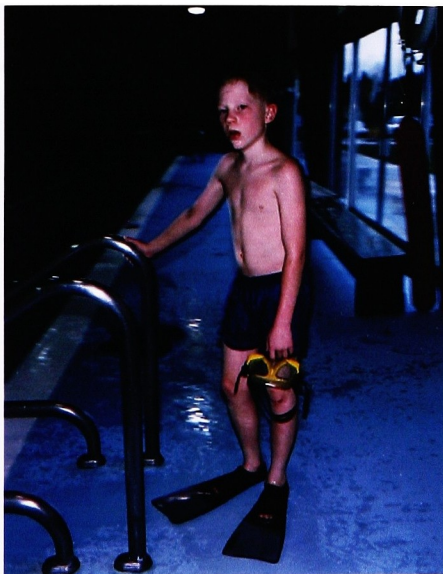


figure 19

However, unlike her, he still retains many child-like aspects — an undeveloped body and an innocent gaze — while beginning to show hints of the awkwardness that accompanies adolescence.

In the image "Pink", Ashley buckles down for a half an hour of locker cleaning. The viewer is treated to a peek inside her locker, revealing the influence of media in her world. The left third of the image is dominated by a magazine photo of the pop star Pink; the composition places Ashley directly



opposite, with her position and expression mimicking her idol. The bright colors of the photograph suggest the multi-colored world of today's media. Television has created a national teenage culture, and this girl clearly participates as a consumer.



figure 20

The last image in the show depicts a boy from behind looking out a doorway toward the driveway of the school. (figure 21) He may be lonely; his hands rest vulnerably by his face as he peers out, waiting. The wide view reveals no friends hanging out with him after school. Is he comfortable alone as he grows up and forms an individual identity? While right now much of his world



figure 21

exists within the school, he looks out to the world where he will become an adult, after this transition.

The color photographs made the main visual statement of the exhibition. But I also wanted to include student voices, so I assembled a book with some statements by

them to be a part of the exhibition. While looking at Wendy Ewald's work during a previous stage of the project, I became interested in having the students somehow participate in the work, even if they weren't taking pictures. I talked to them about the photographs, and asked a group of students to write answers to questions about being in middle school, ultimately gathering a number of

quotations. The book uses black and white images from the beginning of my project, juxtaposing them with comments from the students about growing up.

"Jillian always flirts with Tom and Eric."

— anonymous



figure 22

In the image that accompanies this quote (figure 22), Jillian and Tom stand facing each other while Eric and another friend look on, framed between them. Jillian and Tom appear to be in the midst of a spat, much like a boyfriend and girlfriend, or even a married couple. In contrast to the situation, they all stand around with lollypops. The combination of the child-like circumstances and adult concerns is typical of this age.

"I don't like the 'social status' thing. There are the popular kids, the friends of popular kids, and the 'castaways.' I don't remember this idea in elementary school."

— Nena, grade 7

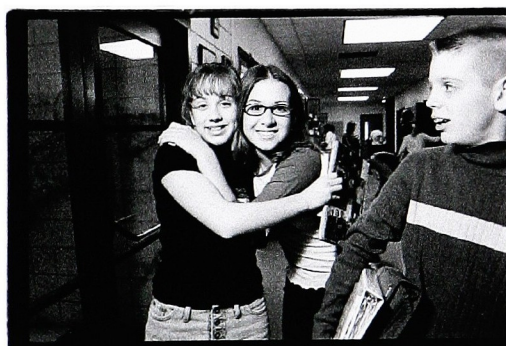


figure 23

In the image next to this quotation (figure 23), two girls pose together rather confidently for the camera. One can guess they might be a couple of the popular kids that Nena describes. The boy who is walking by, however, appears awkward and is perhaps not part of the "in" group. As peers become the main

part of a young adolescent's social world, the group one hangs out with becomes very important. Being comfortable with who you are but also trying to fit in can be a challenge.

## VI. Future Directions

The inclusion of student comments lead me to the idea of using sound — actual recordings of students' voices — in a future exhibit. Voice is often considered a symbol of power, so giving the students the opportunity to have their voice heard in the exhibit might create more of a balance of power between photographer and subject. I would like to pursue this concept for future showings of the work.

The photographs themselves have also started heading in a new direction. During the spring, I began to experiment with the idea of taking posed portraits of the kids. I had been looking at portraits made by other photographers, and the idea of asking the students to present themselves in front of a large camera and lights, as a way of seeing how they presented themselves to the world, was appealing. The first day I made portraits, groups of kids gathered around waiting for their turn, and I asked them to stand back while making the pictures. Many of the kids ended up in the background of the portraits, and the idea of purposely including these students started percolating. I organized a few more sessions at the school, gathered groups of students, and asked them to help me set up the foreground pose and background action in the image. I was interested in playing with the contradiction of a foreground that appeared set up, and a background that seemed natural (even though in fact both had been composed by us.)

Although my ideas are still forming, the idea of a contradiction within the making of the photograph itself, while showing some of the contradictions of pre-adolescence, is interesting. If childhood is a cultural construction, why not construct imagery, together with children themselves, that depicts aspects of it.



Additionally, with teenagers, one often wonders what aspects of their behavior is real and what is a show for the external world. The discordant information in the photograph could mirror the paradoxical time period of overlapping childhood and adolescence.

## VII. Conclusion

"I'm excited to grow up but I can wait because I don't want my childhood to go by fast"

— Lauren, grade 7

Lauren's quote typifies the contradictory attitudes toward childhood today. We still try to protect children and want to savor their perceived innocence. These notions about childhood that we try to hang on to were constructed during the Romantic period in the 18th and 19th centuries. One scholar argues that television is now destroying childhood as a developmental stage. (Sugarman, page 332) In the past we gained knowledge through our experiences as we grew up. Now children vicariously experience aspects of adulthood on television, the internet, in music and the movies. The increased accessibility of adult experiences has made children knowledgeable about the world, conscious of image, and increasingly aware of their sexuality, even while aspects of child-like innocence remain.

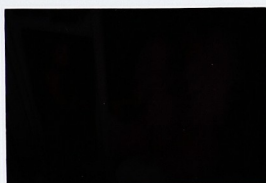
Investigating this landscape that adolescents must navigate is an ongoing photographic project. I am constructing images about varied aspects of childhood and adolescents after a long history of pictures of children as primarily innocent. Equipped with the insights of recent theory, I have taken photographs with no pretense of objectivity. Additionally, my project accepts that childhood is a social construct. My photographs both question the construction of childhood and participate in its reconstruction.

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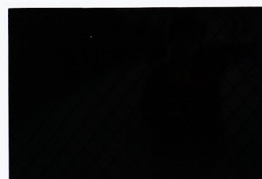


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1) S. Wratten  
*Pink*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2001

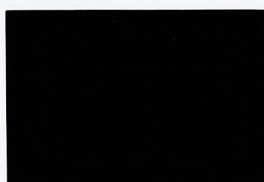
2) S. Wratten  
*Scuba*, c-print  
24" x 20", 2002



3) S. Wratten  
*Recess*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2001



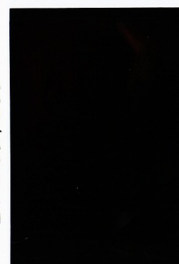
4) S. Wratten  
*On the Phone*, c-print  
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5) S. Wratten  
*Reflection*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2002



6) S. Wratten  
*Slow Dance*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2002

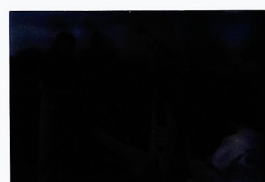
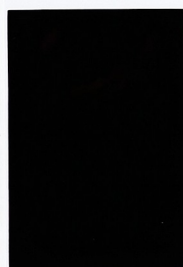


7) S. Wratten  
*Searching*, c-print  
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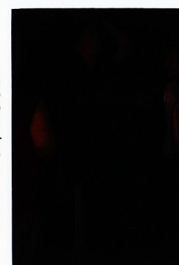


8) S. Wratten  
*Secret*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2001

9) S. Wratten  
*Between Classes*, c-print  
24" x 20", 2002



10) S. Wratten  
*Rocket Club*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2001



11) S. Wratten  
*Crisis*, c-print  
24" x 20", 2002



12) S. Wratten  
*Friends*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2001



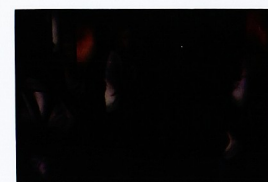
13) S. Wratten  
*Semi-Formal*, c-print  
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14) S. Wratten  
*On the Edge*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2002



15) S. Wratten  
*Career Day*, c-print  
24" x 20", 2001



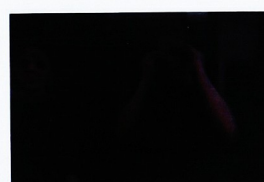
16) S. Wratten  
*Shadows*, c-print  
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17) S. Wratten  
*In Between*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2001



18) S. Wratten  
*Beckerman*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2002



19) S. Wratten  
*Cloudy Vision*, C-print  
20" x 24", 2001



20) S. Wratten  
*Waiting*, c-print  
20" x 24", 2002